



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ESSAY *on the* STILE *of Doctor* SAMUEL JOHNSON.

No. II.

By the Rev. ROBERT BURROWES, *A. M. and M. R. I. A.*

IT is hardly possible for an author who writes much to avoid a peculiarity of manner. The recurrence of thoughts, similar in their restrictions and mutual dependance, introduces to the mind, by a natural association, the same arrangement and construction; and the mind, disdaining to bestow upon words that attention which is due only to things, will be too apt, through haste to execute its task, to admit the first expressions as the best. It despises the humble as well as tedious labour of turning back to re-examine sentences already marked with approbation, and will not easily be persuaded to vary, what considered simply in itself appears to have no fault. Thus from the peculiar turn of each author's thoughts, even though there should be no other cause concurring, there will naturally arise a corresponding peculiarity of stile: a peculiarity which the powerful influence of habit makes so predominant, that there are very few pages, even of

Read
Nov. 13,
1786.

[F]

our

our best writers, which to those who are at all acquainted with their style, do not readily betray their author. Such favourite forms or ornaments of expression, such peculiar modes of arranging, combining and connecting, lie within the easy reach of imitation; and as every writer of eminence will have many who rely on their success in copying him for the foundation of their fame, and many who from admiration of his general excellence are led at last involuntarily to resemble him, criticism can never be more usefully employed than in examining these peculiarities of authors of acknowledged merit, and determining how far they are deserving of praise or censure, how far they are to be imitated or avoided.

As there are no modern writings higher in public estimation than Doctor Johnson's, and as there are none which abound more in appropriate marks of style, there are none which can with more advantage be made the subject of critical enquiry. On their obvious and distinguishing characteristic, the too frequent use of Latin derivatives, I have already discoursed at large. I shall in this essay consider such other peculiarities of Johnson's style, as, though less apt to be taken notice of, will it is presumed when noticed be readily recognized.

AND of all these the merit or demerit must rest with full force on Johnson: for, however the style of his compositions may correspond with his style of conversation, and however extraordinary and perhaps authentic the stories his biographers tell of his fluency may be, yet nothing in his works can fairly be ascribed to carelessness. His style in writing, which he had formed early, became familiar by abundant practice, and in the
course

course of a long continued life of differtation became also his stile of speaking. His authoritative decisions on the merit of all our English authors demand, and his constant employment in critical disquisition should have enabled him to grant it without injury to his literary character, that his own stile should be fairly subjected to animadversion : nor should negligence, which will never be insisted on in diminution of his merit, be admitted as a sufficient plea in extenuating his faults.

As his peculiarities cannot be ascribed to carelessness, so neither are they the effect of necessity. Few of them would have appeared, had Johnson, intent only on communicating his ideas, despised all aids of embellishment. But that this did not suit his ideas of literary perfection, we are sufficiently informed in his remarks on the stile of Swift ; an author who has at least this merit, that he has escaped all those faults which the critic has fallen into. The easy and safe conveyance of meaning Johnson there declares to be “ not the highest praise : against that inattention with which “ known truths are received, it makes,” he says, “ no provision ; it instructs, but it does not persuade.” Our author seems therefore to have thought it necessary, in conformity with his own principle, to introduce into his stile certain ornaments, which, in his opinion, would prove the effectual means of captivating attention ; and these ornaments, too laboriously sought for, and used without sufficient variety, have become the peculiarities of his stile. I shall comprize the principal of them under two heads, as arising either from his endeavours after splendor and magnificence, or from his endeavours after harmony ; for to these two heads they may almost all be referred.

NOT that it is denied, that magnificence and harmony are objects worthy an author's regard; but the means made use of to attain these, if not skilfully selected, may fail of their intended effect; may substitute measurement for harmony, and make that only pompous which was designed to be magnificent. On dignified subjects they are no doubt to be attended to, for the style should always be proportioned to the subject; but on familiar and meaner topics they should, by a parity of reasoning, be avoided: and however well adapted to excite attention, it may be remarked, that in general they rather fix it on the expression, than on the sentiment, and too often cloy that appetite they were intended but to stimulate.

JOHNSON'S study of splendor and magnificence, by inducing him as much as possible to reject the weaker words of language, and to display only the important, has filled his pages with many peculiarities. His sentences, deprived of those feeble ties which restrained them to individual cases and circumstances, seem so many detached aphorisms, applicable to many other particulars, and certainly more dignified as more universal. But though he may have employed this art with some advantage, it is yet hardly to be recommended. Johnson's thoughts were so precise, and his expressions so minutely discriminated, that he was able to keep the leading circumstances of the particular case distinctly in view, and in the form of an universal sentence implicitly to insinuate them to the reader: an injudicious imitator, by generalizing his expressions, might in some instances make that false which under restrictions might have been true; and in almost all, make that obscure which otherwise would have been perspicuous.

As

As every substantive presents a determinate image to the mind, and is of course a word of importance, Johnson takes care to crowd his sentences with substantives, and to give them on all occasions the most distinguished place. The instrument, the motive, or the quality therefore, which ordinary writers would have in the oblique case, usually takes the lead in Johnson's sentences; while the person, which in connected writing is often expressed by some weak pronoun, is either entirely omitted, or thrown into a less conspicuous part. Thus, "fruition left them nothing to ask, and innocence left them nothing to fear,"—"trifles written by idleness and published by vanity,"—"wealth may, by hiring flattery or laying diligence asleep, confirm error and harden stupidity." This practice doubtless gives activity and importance, but caution must be used to prevent its exceeding the bounds of moderation. When the person is to be dethroned from its natural pre-eminence, it is not every quality which has sufficient dignity to assume its place: besides, in narration, or continued writing of any sort, the too frequent change of leading objects in sentences contributes to dissipate the attention, and withdraw it from the great and primary one: and even in Johnson's hands this ornament has become too luxuriant, when affections, instead of being personified, are absolutely humanized, and we are teized with the repeated mention of "ear of greatness,"—"the bosom of suspicion,"—and "the eye of wealth, of hope, and of beauty."

THIS attachment to substantives has led him, wherever it was possible by a change of construction, to substitute them in place of the other parts of speech; instead therefore of the usual construction,

construction, where the adjective agrees with the substantive, he forms a new substantive from the adjective, which governs the other in the possessive case. Thus, instead of "with as easy an approach," he always writes, "with the same facility of approach:" instead of "with such lively turns, such elegant irony, and such severe sarcasms,"—he says, "with such vivacity of turn, such elegance of irony, and such asperity of sarcasm." When the effect produced no otherwise arises from the substantive, than as possessed of the quality which the adjective denotes, this change of construction is an happy one: it expresses that which is necessary in the thought, by a necessary member of the sentence; whereas the usual form lays the whole stress of the idea on a word, which, without the smallest injury to the construction, may be safely removed. An instance however may shew, that Johnson sometimes uses it where the same reasoning would shew it to be absolutely improper. "Steele's imprudence of generosity, or vanity of profusion," he says, "kept him always incurably necessitous."—Here, since Steele's generosity could not have kept him necessitous if it had not been excessive or imprudent, "imprudence of generosity" is proper: but as his being vain of profusion, if he had not actually been profuse, never could have produced this effect; since his vanity is but the very remote cause of that which his profusion would have effected, whether he had been vain of it or not, "vanity of profusion" is an improper expression.

THIS ambition of denoting every thing by substantives has done considerable violence to Johnson's constructions:—"places of little frequentation,"—"circumstances of no elegant recital,"—"with emulation of price,"—"the library which is of late erection,"

“ erection,”—“ too much temerity of conclusion,”—“ Phillips’s addition to tobacco,” are expressions of affected and ungraceful harshness. This, however, is not the worst fault such constructions may have, for they often become unnecessarily obscure: as “ he will continue the road by annual elongation;” that is, by compleating some additional part of it each year:—“ Swift now lost distinction;” that is, he could not now distinguish his acquaintances. Many of the substantives too which are thus introduced, are words absolutely foreign to the language: as “ ebriety of amusement,”—“ perpetual perfation,”—“ to obtain an obstruction of the profits, though not an inhibition of the performance,”—“ Community of possession must always include spontaneity of production.” One of our most usual forms of substantives, the participle of the verb used substantively, to give room for such introduced words he has on all occasions studiously avoided: Yet Dr. Louth would scarcely have given the rule for a construction repugnant to the genius of our language; and some arguments will be necessary to prove that the words, “ renewing, vanishing, shadowing and recalling,” should give place to “ renovation, evanescence, adumbration and revocation,” when it is considered, that all who understand English know the meaning of the former, while the latter are intelligible to such only of them as understand Latin; but of this I have elsewhere treated fully.

JOHNSON’S licentious constructions however are not to be conceived as flowing entirely from his passion for substantives. His endeavours to attain magnificence, by removing his style from the vulgarity, removed it also from the simplicity of common diction,

dition, and taught him the abundant use of inversions and licentious constructions of every sort. Almost all his sentences begin with an oblique case, and words used in uncommon significations, with Latin and Greek idioms, are strewed too plentifully in his pages. Of this sort are the following: “ I was only not a boy”—“ Part they did”—“ Shakespeare approximates the remote”—“ Cowley was ejected from Cambridge”—“ Brogues are a kind of artless shoes”—“ Milk liberal of curd.” Such expressions it is unnecessary to mark with censure; they bear in themselves an harshness so repulsive, that easy writing must be held in more than ordinary contempt, when they are considered as patterns worthy of imitation.

METAPHORICAL expression is one of those arts of splendor which Johnson has most frequently employed; and while he has availed himself of all its advantages, he has escaped most of its concomitant faults. Here is no muse, which in one line is a horse and in the next a boat*; nor is there any pains requisite to keep the horse and boat from singing. Johnson presents to your view no chaos of discordant elements, no feeble interlining of the literal with the figurative. In his metaphors and similes the picture is always compleat in itself, and some particulars of exact resemblance are distinctly impressed upon the reader. What image can be more beautiful than that which represents the beginnings of madness as “ the variable weather of the mind, “ the flying vapours which from time to time cloud reason “ without eclipsing it?” Or what more apposite than that which calls Congreve’s personages “ a sort of intellectual gladiators?”

* Vide Johnson’s Life of Addison.

SOMETIMES,

SOMETIMES, indeed, it must be acknowledged, his metaphors succeed each other in too quick succession, and are followed up too elaborately : but to commit this fault he was solicited by temptations scarcely to be resisted. Much of his life had been consumed in enquiring into the various acceptations of each word, all of which except the primary one are so many metaphorical uses of it ; so that every word suggested many metaphors to his mind, presenting also from his quotations a variety of other terms of the same class, with which it would wish to be associated. Thus *ardour*, which in his preface to his Dictionary, he observes, is never used to denote material heat, yet to an etymologist would naturally suggest it ; and Johnson accordingly, speaking of the “ *ardour* of posthumous fame,” says that “ some have considered it as little better than *splendid* madness ; as a “ *flame kindled* by pride and *fanned* by folly.” Thinking of a deep stratagem, he is naturally led from the depth to the surface, and declares “ that Addison knew the heart of man from “ the *depths* of stratagem to the *surface* of affectation.” His subjects too were such as scarcely could be treated of without figurative diction : the powers of the understanding require the aid of illustration to become intelligible to common readers. But to enquire how our author illustrates them, is to detect the greatest and almost the only fault in his metaphors. “ The “ mind stagnates without external ventilation”—“ An intellectual “ digestion, which concocted the pulp of learning, but refused “ the husks”—“ An accumulation of knowledge impregnated his “ mind, fermented by study, and sublimed by imagination.” From such illustrations common readers will, it is feared, receive but little assistance. The sources from which his allusions are borrowed are so abstruse and scientific, and his expressions so

studiously technical, that even those who most commend his similes as apposite, cannot pretend that many of them are explanatory.

OF the peculiarities of Johnson's style, which I proposed to treat of under my second head, as arising from his study of harmony, the principal I may call the parallelism of his sentences; which admits no clause, without one or two concomitants, exactly similar in order and construction. There is scarcely a page of the Rambler which does not produce abundant instances of this peculiarity: and what is the ornament; which, if introduced so often, can be always introduced happily? Or what is the ornament, however happily introduced, which will not disgust by such frequent repetitions? Johnson's mind was so comprehensive, that no circumstance occurred to him unaccompanied by many others similar; no effect, without many others depending on the same or similar causes. So close an alliance in the thought naturally demanded a corresponding similitude in the expression: yet surely all similar circumstances, all the effects of each cause, are not equally necessary to be communicated; and as it is acknowledged that even a continued poem of pure iambics would disgust, variety must appear an indispensably necessary ingredient to harmony. Were we even to admit then, that in any particular tried the construction of one of its clauses could not be altered without injuring the harmony of the sentence, yet a regard to the harmony of the whole treatise will occasionally make such an alteration necessary.

BUT these parallel sentences are not always faultless in themselves. Sometimes, though indeed rarely, a word is used without
a definitive

a definitive appropriation to that to which it is annexed; as in this instance, " Omnipotence cannot be exalted, infinity cannot be amplified, perfection cannot be improved:" where the exact relation between amplitude and infinity, and between improvement and perfection, is not at all kept up by exaltation being applied to Omnipotence. Sometimes too words are introduced, which answer hardly any other purpose than to make the parallelism more conspicuous, by adding a new member to each clause. Thus, in the following passage, " grows too slothful for the labour of contest, too tender for the asperity of contradiction, and too delicate for the coarseness of truth;" where labour, asperity and coarseness are sufficiently implied in slothful, tender and delicate. Sometimes too the parallelism itself is unnecessarily obtruded on the reader, as " quickness of apprehension and celerity of reply," where " celerity" having precisely the same meaning as " quickness," could only have been introduced to make up the parallelism: " Nothing is far-fought or hard-laboured" where the first adverb is essential to the sense, and the last only to the sound. " When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather, they are in haste to tell each other what each must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm." Such uninteresting enumerations, since they contribute nothing to the meaning, we can only suppose introduced, as our author observes of some of Milton's Italian names, to answer the purposes of harmony.

It were unjust however not to declare, that many of his parallelisms are altogether happy. For antithesis indeed he was most eminently qualified; none has exceeded him in nicety of

discernment, and no author's vocabulary has ever equalled his in a copious assortment of forcible and definite expressions. Thus, in his comparison of Blackmore's attack on the dramatic writers with Collier's, "Blackmore's censure," he says, "was cold and general, Collier's was personal and ardent: Blackmore taught his readers to dislike, what Collier incited them to abhor." But it is useless to multiply instances of that which all must have perceived, since all his contrasts and comparisons possess the same high degree of accuracy and perfection. From the same cause may be inferred the excellence of his parallel sentences, where praise-worthy qualities are separated from their concomitant faults, or kindred effects are disunited: as where he calls Goldsmith "a man who had the art of being minute without tediousness, and general without confusion; whose language was copious without exuberance, exact without constraint, and easy without weakness." But Johnson's triads occur so frequently, that I find myself always led aside to wonder, that all the effects from the same cause should be so often discovered reducible to the mystical number three: I torment myself to find a reason for that particular order in which the effects are recited, and I am involuntarily delayed to consider, whether some are not omitted which have a right to be inserted, or some enumerated which due discretion would have suppressed. Surely I must be singular in my turn of thought, or this art of attention, which thus leads away from the main subject, cannot be an happy one.

His desire of harmony has led him to seek even for the minute ornament of alliteration. Thus, he says, "they toil without prospect of praise, and pillage without hope of profit."—
Shakespeare

“ Shakespeare opens a mine, which contains gold and diamonds
 “ in inexhaustible plenty, though clouded by incrustations, de-
 “ bafed by impurities, and mingled with a mafs of meaner
 “ minerals.” Alliteration indeed is fo often casual, and fo often
 neceffary, that it is difficult to charge it on an author’s inten-
 tions. But Johnson employs it fo frequently, and continues it
 through fo many words, as in the instances given above, that
 when we confider too how nearly allied it is as an ornament
 to parallelifm, we have I think fufficient grounds to determine
 it not involuntary.

UNDER this head I fhall beg leave to mention one peculiarity
 of Johnson’s ftile, which though it may not have arifen, at leaft
 not entirely, from his endeavours after harmony, yet discovers it-
 felf obviously to the reader by its effects upon the ear; I mean
 the ftudied recurrence of the fame words in the latter part of
 the fentence, which had appeared in the former; the favourite
 ornament of his Idler, as parallelifms are of the Rambler, and
 ufed not unfrequently in the Lives of the Poets. As the ufe of
 it is attended with many advantages and many difadvantages,
 the author who would adopt it fhould watch it with a fufpi-
 cious eye. If reftained within the bounds of moderation, it is
 on many occafions the moft lively, concise, perfpicuous and for-
 cible mode of expreffing the thought. Since the words too at
 their return naturally recall to the mind the antecedent members
 of the fentence, it may be confidered as a valuable affiftant in
 imprinting the thought upon the memory. It has alfo this ad-
 ditional advantage, that as unfairnefs in reasoning often arifes
 from change of terms, fo where the terms are not changed, we
 are apt to prefume the reasoning to be fair. Thus, where
 we

we read in the Life of Savage the following sentence, “ As
 “ he always spoke with respect of his master, it is probable the
 “ mean rank in which he then appeared did not hinder his
 “ genius from being distinguished or his industry from being
 “ rewarded; and if in so low a state he obtained distinctions
 “ and rewards, it is not likely they were gained but by genius and
 “ industry.” In this instance the perspicuity of the reasoning seems
 to have been preserved through such a chain of propositions, merely
 by the artifice of returning the same words a second time to the
 reader’s observation. But the unrestrained use of this art is per-
 haps one of the greatest faults an author can adopt. A fault,
 which burlesques grave subjects by communicating impressions of
 levity, and on occasions less serious, instead of being sprightly
 degenerates into quaintness: which for disquisition and reasoning
 gives us nothing but point and epigram; by a constrained con-
 ciseness often betrays to obscurity, and where most successful,
 leads but to trite retorts and verbal oppositions, which the rea-
 der has already anticipated, and perhaps already rejected.

WERE Johnson however to be charged with negligence, it
 might be most fairly on the subject of harmony. There are
 many passages in his works where sounds almost similar are
 suffered to approach too near each other; and though some of
 these are too palpable to be passed over unnoticed by the author,
 yet I can never think any ear so incorrect as to adopt same-
 ness and monotony for harmony. Either way however Johnson
 is culpable, and his alternative is either a faulty principle, or a
 negligence in his practice.

YET

YET his pages abound with memorials of close attention to harmony ; unfortunately with memorials equally deserving of censure ; with heroic lines and lyric fragments. Thus, he says, “ Pope foresaw the future efflorescence of imagery just budding in his mind, and resolved to spare no art or industry of cultivation ; the soft luxuriance of his fancy was already shooting, and all the gay varieties of diction were ready at his hand to colour and embellish it.” “ I will chase the deer, I will subdue the whale, resistless as the frost of darkness, and unwearied as the summer fun.” Surely this is to revive the Pindaric licentiousness, to confound the distinction between prose and poetry, to introduce numbers by study while negligence admits rhymes, and to annihilate the harmony of prose, by giving the reader an obvious opportunity to compare it with the harmony of versification.

INDEED all the peculiarities of Johnson’s style, pursued to their excess, tend to raise prosaic composition above itself : they give the admirers of Gray a fit occasion of retorting “ the glittering accumulation of ungraceful ornaments, the double double toil and trouble, the strutting dignity which is tall by walking on tip-toe,” which have so harshly been objected to their favourite. Simplicity is too often given up for splendor, and the reader’s mind is dazzled instead of being enlightened.

I SHALL now conclude this enquiry into the peculiarities of Johnson’s style with remarking, that if I have treated more of blemishes than beauties, I have done it, not so much to pass censure on Johnson, as to give warning to his imitators. I have indeed selected my instances from his writings : but in writings
so

fo numerous, who is there that would not sometimes have indulged his peculiarities in licentiousness? I have singled him out from the whole body of English writers, because his universally acknowledged beauties would be most apt to induce imitation ; and I have treated rather on his faults than his perfections, because an essay might comprize all the observations I could make upon his faults, while volumes would not be sufficient for a treatise on his perfections.